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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine core Japanese communication patterns, as viewed from insider and outsider perspectives. Using a semistructured interview method and a theme analysis method, four Japanese cultural communication themes were uncovered during the four month study: (1) communication style--concealment versus revelation, (2) communication ritual--obligatory reciprocity versus voluntary reciprocity, (3) relational placement--complementarity versus symmetry, and (4) relational distance--remoteness versus closeness. Forty-two interviewees were involved in the project: 28 outsiders and 14 insiders. The following conclusions were made. For the Japanese, a concealing style of interactions serves vital human relationship functions and connotes important interactional value when compared to a "revealing" style of interaction. Obligatory reciprocity exists in social relationships. Through relational placement, people know where they stand in the hierarchy and what is expected of them; and through relational distance, they know what degree of closeness to expect from intimates and acquaintances. Awareness of these themes helps people cope with relationships and asserts pressure for them to carry out their roles in society. (EL)

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THE OUTSIDER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to shed light on the core Japanese communication patterns as viewed from an insider perspective, and as viewed from an outsider perspective. Through semi-structured interview method and theme analysis method, four core Japanese communication themes were identified: (1) Communication style--concealment versus revealment, (2) communication ritual--obligatory reciprocity versus voluntary reciprocity, (3) relational placement--complementarity versus symmetry, and (4) relational distance--remoteness versus closeness. These four cultural communication themes were repeatedly and forcefully emphasized in the interpretive accounts of both the insiders and the outsiders of the Japanese culture.

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RATIONALE

In the span of the last five years, there have been a plethora of studies and reports on fundamental Japanese values, management practices, and Japanese behavior. Most of these articles were either written by American researchers or Japanese scholars, relying either on the responses of an American sample or a Japanese sample. Nevertheless, the Japanese continue to puzzle and dazzle the world with their "strange" and sometimes "surprising" behavior in both the international arena and on the domestic scene, as observed by an outsider.

The intent of this paper is to shed light on the core Japanese communication patterns as viewed from an outsider perspective, and as viewed from an insider perspective. This convergent approach is a conceptual as well as a methodological exercise in an attempt to "make sense" of the sense-making process of how outsiders interpret the meaning systems of Japanese communication patterns, and how insiders interpret their own communication behaviors. It was thought that while an outsider has the advantage of observing Japanese behavior from a distance (and hence establishing "objective" validity), an insider has the advantage of the experiential knowledge of having lived within the system (and hence establishing "subjective" validity). While an outsider might capture the surface structure of certain taken-for-granted communication events in the local culture, an insider might be able to provide the deep structure and cultural reasoning for these events. Finally, it was thought that while an outsider might focus on the surprising elements of a particular communication form, an insider might emphasize the common-sense bases of a particular communication ritual. Through obtaining the interpretive accounts

of how outsiders and insiders perceive Japanese communication behavior, this essay becomes an exploratory effort of probing the concept of intersubjective validity for the aim of understanding the meaning systems of core Japanese communication patterns.

Specifically, the research question of this study asks: How do outsiders and insiders differ from (or are similar to) their interpretive accounts of core Japanese communication patterns?

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The data were collected over a 4-month period through a semi-structured interview method. Participants were drawn from a medium-size city in Western Japan, and the city was located in one of the most traditional prefectures in Japan.

Altogether 42 interviewees were involved in the research project: 28 outsiders, and 14 insiders. Outsiders were defined as sojourners who stayed in Japan for a period of time for a specific purpose or objective, and whose citizenship is not Japanese and whose native language is not Japanese. Insiders were defined as individuals whose citizenship is Japanese and whose native language is Japanese. However, all insiders were proficient in spoken English for the purpose of the interviewing sessions.

The outsider group includes 16 males and 12 females, with nationalities including American, Australian, Ecuadorian, French, Indian, Malaysian, Papua-New Guinean, and Chinese—age ranged from 17 to 40. Occupation ranged from cultural exchange professors, high school teachers, and businesspersons, to ASF high school exchange students. Length of stay ranged from 6 months to 4 years. The insider group includes 8 males and 6 females, with age ranging from 18 to 52. Occupation ranged from university professors, university

students, professionals, and businesspersons, to housewives. A form of "snowballing technique" (or "network contacting") was used in the generation of the interview sample. All interview sessions were audiotaped. Each interview session lasted anywhere from 1 hour to 3.5 hours, with repeated interviews conducted with the same 6 interviewees (on a voluntary basis) during the span of 4 months in the outsider group.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted through theme analysis method. (Owen, 1984). The unit of analysis was "cultural communication theme." "Cultural communication theme" was defined as a recurring pattern of discourse with the primary locus of concern on the relationship between culture and communication. The criteria for delineating the presence of a "cultural communication" theme were: (1) recurrence--at least two parts of a report had the same thread of meaning although the wordings might be different; (2) repetition--explicit and repeated use of the same wording on a common-running theme; (3) forcefulness--refers to vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to emphasize the importance of the underlying theme (Owen, 1984, p. 275).

For this particular study, theme analysis method was used in an analysis of 12 written transcripts of the audiotaped interviews (transcriptions of the rest of the reports are in progress). Each written transcript totaled anywhere from 25 pages to 85 pages (single-spaced written notes). Beyond relying on these written transcripts for data analysis purposes, existing literature available on Japanese values and communication was consulted to shed light on the interpretation of the interview data. Finally, introspective accounts based on the author's personal experiences (from an outsider standpoint) as a critical observer and a naïve participant in the Japanese culture for a 4-month period, was incorporated into the data interpretation process.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Based on the written transcripts of 12 interpretive accounts of Japanese communication patterns, 4 key cultural communication themes were discovered in this study. These 4 core themes were: (1) communication style—concealment versus revealment; (2) communication ritual—obligatory reciprocity versus voluntary reciprocity; (3) relational placement—complementarity versus symmetry; (4) relational distance—remoteness versus closeness. These 4 cultural themes were repeatedly and forcefully emphasized in the interpretive accounts of both the insiders and the outsiders.

Communication Style: Concealment versus Revealment

Communication style was defined as a particular manner of interacting, using either verbal and/or nonverbal messages to express one's inner experiences and feelings. In comparing the differences between Japanese and American communicative styles, Dean Barnlund (1975) observes:

The Japanese talk only in the most general terms even with their parents and closest friends. The average level of disclosure for Americans with all target persons, including even strangers and untrusted persons, exceeds the level of verbal disclosure of Japanese in even their most intimate relationships. (p. 413)

In the area of nonverbal expressiveness, Barnlund found that there was a dramatic contrast between the two cultures with regard to nonverbal tactile contact—with Americans reporting twice the amount of physical contact with various target persons than that reported by the Japanese.

The melodies of concealment versus revealment, implicitness versus expressiveness formed the common threads of the key theme of communication style in the 12 reports. Some typical common words and phrases that were used are: "elusive," "ambiguous," "reserved," "restrained," "hiding behind façade,"

and "surround themselves with a mist of clouds." The following two quotations will serve to highlight this particular theme:

W.B. (F., 24, Australia): The Japanese people don't like to talk as much as the Australians. They hide behind doors, but they are very curious of what's going on out there. They're always looking at me, wondering what I'm going to do next. Very curious, but a very polite curious. They are dying to see what you'll be doing next, but they don't want to be seen, or being seen. They would be very embarrassed if they're seen looking. But they love to look.

F.H. (F., 40, Japan): Yes. We really do not trust people who talk alot, who reveal alot. We would prefer to listen. Too much talking sounds hollow to our ears. We would rather maintain silence when there is nothing there to talk about. Talking can be very deceiving. Too much talk can also hurt many people's feelings.

The interpretive accounts above illustrate the importance of "non-talk" versus "talk" as a positive virtue in Japanese communication style. Concealment is used functionally to humble oneself in front of others, to not overexpose oneself to the public world, and to make sure one does not hurt another person's feelings. Concealment serves as the style of respect for another person's face and at the same time humbling oneself in front of another person.

In commenting on the geometry of the Japanese cultural life, Singer (1973) aptly summarizes:

In every gesture of daily life, in the style of conversation, in the proper form of giving a present, the main concern, it seems, is how to wrap up things, ideas, feelings.... It is as if the Japanese,

not content with living in a mountainous archipelago all too often visited by mists and clouds and rainstorms, had attempted ... to reproduce in their social and cultural life an intensified image of their surroundings... wherever they go they make a network of walls and fences behind which to retire: unwritten rules, ceremonies and taboos. (p. 45)

Wrapping up their feelings cautiously, sharing their ideas indirectly and tentatively, and half disappearing behind the screen of words elusively --are some of the most common Japanese communication characteristics. While outsiders are often baffled by such verbal concealment and tentativeness, the insiders are often ready to offer profound cultural reasonings to interpret and make-sense of their own implicit communication patterns.

Communication Ritual: Obligatory Reciprocity versus Voluntary Reciprocity

Communication ritual was defined as the ... repeated use of certain interaction forms and ceremonies (for example, politeness forms, apology rituals, etc.) in deference to a sacred object or concept in the performance of everyday communication conducts. The sacred concept in this instance is "reciprocity." Similar terms and phrases were repeatedly being used by both outsider interviewees and insider interviewees: "mutual obligation and reciprocity is the key," "it's a clearcut give-and-take relationship," "returning and giving favors is fundamental here," "on-giri is the ultimate to understanding the Japanese system."

According to Takie Sugiyama Libra (1976), on is a "relational concept combining a benefit or benevolence given with a debt or obligation thus incurred ... From the donor's point of view, on refers to a social credit, while from the receiver's point of view, it means a social debt" (p. 91). Essentially, what makes the concept difficult for outsiders to understand is the obligatory nature

of the sacred construct. For most of the outsiders, doing favors for each other, being nice to each other, or exchanging gifts between each other is a communicative act out of one's free will and voluntary choice. Whereas for most Japanese, doing favors for one another entails a lifetime of debts and obligations. Giri, the implicit normative force that binds debtor to his/her creditor, implies that "a sense of constraint under which the debtor feels bound in his actions toward the creditor. The giri-bound debtor then makes efforts to repay, not so much out of a spontaneous willingness to express his gratitude as out of his compulsion to get rid of the debt and thus restore his autonomy" (Lebra, 1976, p. 93). On-giri is the normative glue that binds social relationships together in an obligatory and involuntary manner. If a Japanese does not honor the ethical code of on-giri, he or she will be ostracized from that particular social circle forever.

From the outsider perspective, the foreign observers were often puzzled and felt frustrated by such involuntary forms of social obligations and duties. As one outsider commented (P.E., M, 23, USA):

For one reason or another, the Japanese seems to be always going through tons of rituals and motions of the things that they do. All the politeness that is so highly talked about, when it gets down to it, a lot of it is just superficial. It's what they feel they are obligated to do. It's their duty and not much more.

Another outsider noted (C.S., F, 26, China):

I feel that if they gave me two oranges last week, I have to return three apples to them right away this week. When I first came here, they were all here helping me out. Then I realized I owe them all a heavy debt, which I'm still slowly repaying now. They won't let you forget either.

Another outsider remarked (J.R., F, 34, USA):

Well, all these gift-giving and gift-receiving did get to me sometimes. It became a vicious cycle. I have to check out the prices of these gifts and then make sure my returned gift is equivalent to the value of the gift I have received. They even have special words for all these gift-giving occasions—chugen (midsummer gift), seibo (year-end gift), gobaku-iwai (exam success gift), sotsugyo-iwai (graduation celebration gift), and shiishokoku-iwai (employment celebration gift), etc. It gets to you sometimes.

From the perspective of an insider, she commented (T.N., F, 39, Japan):

On-giri is very important because it preserves the wa or harmony in human relationships. It smoothes many pathways to many things. You know there are certain proper ways and the right ways to thank people who have helped you out along the way. You have to be a Japanese to understand this. It's really a very Japanese concept. As Japanese, we have to accept it as it is. It can't be helped.

For outsiders, the on-giri concept constrains human relationships to a very mechanical level; for Japanese, the concept places relationships in the proper order and form. For the outsiders, the bonding of human relationships should be out of one's free will; for the Japanese, the concept emphasizes a code of ethics and honors to one's social friends and colleagues. For outsiders, the concept of obligatory reciprocity stifles the spontaneity out of true friendship; for the Japanese, the concept is the beginning of an interlocking chain of interdependent group relationships. By engaging in such obligatory relationships, the Japanese feel that they will always have someone

to count on, someone to rely upon. It is a very controlled, self-conscious process of a networking system. In the context of Japanese culture, it works.

Relational Placement: Complementarity versus Symmetricality

In summarizing the differences between American culture and Japanese culture, John Condon (1977) concludes:

As a culture, Americans place great value on symmetrical relationships—minimizing differences that might suggest inequality.

Americans tend not to like titles or honorifics that suggest some superior-subordinate relationship.... Symmetrical relationships maximize similarities of age, sex, role, or status and serve to encourage the differences of each individual as an individual....

Complementary relationships maximize differences in age, sex, role, or status and serve to encourage the mutuality of the relationship, the interdependence. (pp. 53-54)

In short, for the Japanese, they like to emphasize the law of likeness and similarity; for Americans, they like to stress the importance of uniqueness and difference. For the Japanese, there is a proper place and a proper role for everything—with clear foreground/background relationship complementing one another. For Americans, status and role relationship should give way to equal symmetrical relationship. Relationship placement was defined in this context as the structural form of a relationship that is derived either through age, sex, role, status, occupation, or social background. In commenting on the proper place of different relationship types in Japan, an outsider remarked (S.N., M, 28, USA):

Yes, they definitely enjoy being homogeneous and at the same time know their proper place in life—this gives them lots of security.

They know where they stand in the hierarchy, and they know what is expected of them in both directions.

In noting the differential role treatment of males and females in the Japanese culture, an outsider protested (W.B., F, 24, Australia):

I've always been an independent woman, but I've never gone into women's liberation or something like that. I've worked it out myself. If a woman wants to do her own thing, she should. But if it's going to hurt women in western cultures as much as it hurts Japanese women, then I would certainly say something to them. Because I feel that the Japanese woman is completely being trampled upon. I really do. In almost every way.

From a Japanese woman, came this response (S.I., F, 31, Japan):

I live in Japan, this is my home, and I accept my role. Although I'm a professional woman, I still do many of the traditional women things. I feel awkward to see men pour tea for themselves. I can pour their tea for them with much more ease and grace, and it makes me feel good to do it. No, I don't perceive any conflict with my modern role and my traditional role. They all fit together nicely.

From a Japanese man, came this observation (K.W., M, 36, Japan):

The ideal Japanese husband is to make big decisions with family matters. The wife is to support or assist his decisions. The wife can influence the decision but the decision itself has to be made by the husband...There is a ritualistic aspect to it. The wife can influence the husband's opinion 99%, but still the husband should make the decision so that he can feel comfortable with it. It gives a great deal of authority to the husband. He feels in-charge.

While many female outsiders viewed the male/female complementary relationship in very negative and pathetic light, there was a mixed reaction among their Japanese female counterparts. Insider interview responses ranged from resentments and frustrations, to passive acceptance of such unequal complementary roles. Some of the typical comments of the Japanese females were: "it can't be helped," "it's fate," "we can't do much about it," and "things are changing, but it takes time."

Relational Distance: Remoteness versus Closeness

Relational distance was defined as the degree of closeness and emotional involvement with the relational partner. According to Takeo Doi (1981), the Japanese place a high emphasis on the distinction between "outer circle" individuals and the "inside circle" individuals. In one sense, all gaijin or foreigners are lumped into the category of "outside circle," while family members, friends, and work colleagues are placed in various concentric circles of the "inside circle." Two specific attitudes emerge out of this sharp distinction: the omote ("exterior" or "outside") and the ura ("interior" or "inside") cultures. As Okabe (1983) explains:

In the heterogeneous, egalitarian, sasara-type, doing, pushing culture of the United States, there is no distinction between the omote and the ura aspects of the culture... In the hierarchical, takotsubo-type, being, pulling culture of Japan, on the other hand, a clear-cut distinction should always be made between the omote and the ura dimensions of culture, the former being public, formal, and conventional, and the latter private, informal, and unconventional.

(p. 25)

Hence, in an omote situation (what is exposed to the public), one should always proceed with caution. Relational distance is important so that both relational partners can engage in proper "face work": respect each other's face, not to

cause each other to lose face, and also not to embarrass oneself by losing face in front of the other person (Ting-Toomey, 1985). In the ura situation (what is hidden from the public eyes), more spontaneous and intimate communication behaviors are allowed. The mutual expressions of liking and affection are accepted. As the Japanese move towards the core inner circle of intimate relationships, ishin denshin (heart-to-heart communication) or "heartfelt silence" may also act as the peak form of relational closeness. As an insider noted (H.O., M, 34, Japan):

If you are forced to speak everything, that means the end of the relationship. The closer you are, the fewer words you need. For example, in the case of the relationship between husband and wife, you keep silent, you feel comfortable with each other. And if the other party signals something, the other will understand immediately—from the long experience, and from the context.

In responding to whether an outsider can ever move towards the "inner circle" of the Japanese culture, an outsider answered (P.E., M, 25, USA):

They say it's impossible, and they rave and rave about it. People who have been married and lived here for 10 to 15 years, they are still always a gaijin to a Japanese. I am not trying to blend in. I'm just trying to see it from their point of view. Not blend in, 'cause I know it's impossible. Fit in, in a sense, where I can see the world from their point of view... I try to ask myself, why? I try to put myself in their place, so I guess I'm talking about empathy.

From the Japanese point of view, an insider responded (T.W., F, 29, Japan):

It takes time because a foreigner stands out, so different from Japanese by appearance. The foreigners can become insiders through marriage, through having children...However, it will take time. It takes patience.

Finally, another insider echoed the same response (K.W., M, 36, Japan):

You have to be patient with the Japanese. They need time to understand you, to feel you out. If they do not invite you to their house for dinner, go out with them to a restaurant. Do not be offended. You have to wait patiently until the Japanese feel comfortable with you, then they might invite you to their home.

Then we don't have to worry about our appearance, or our small humble home.

In sum, while most outsiders in this sample do feel a strong sense of alienation and distance from the Japanese "inner circle," some seems to use a more active way to bridge this cultural gap, while others resign themselves to the fact that this is the Japanese "way of life." On the other hand, most Japanese do stress the all-encompassing concept of patience to resolve this relational distance of remoteness.

DISCUSSION

In short, using a theme analysis method, 4 cultural communication themes were uncovered in this particular study: (1) concealment versus revealment; (2) obligatory reciprocity versus voluntary reciprocity, (3) complementarity versus symmetry; (4) relational remoteness versus relational closeness.

In examining the interpretive accounts of 12 audiotaped transcripts, the following conclusions can be made. First, different communication styles serve different communication functions in different cultural settings—for the Japanese, a "concealing" style of interaction serves vital human relationship functions and connotes important interactional value when compared to a "revealing" style of interaction. Secondly, to the Japanese, obligatory reciprocity in social relationships greases the problematic situations of interpersonal encounters and the implicit rule of on-giri asserts normative pressures for every status holder to carry out his/her proper role in society.

Thirdly, for the Japanese, there is a proper place, a proper time, a proper season for the combination of different types of relationships. Complementary relationships reflect the "yin-yang" balance of the harmonious universe in its natural surrounding. Finally, while self-discipline and self-restraint are vital for formal relationships, depth of emotional involvement and the nonverbal echoing of mutual silence (heart-to-heart communication) can be discovered in the core concentric circles of Japanese intimate relationships.

In terms of the different interpretive accounts that the outsiders and the insiders used in "making sense" of the meaning systems of the core Japanese communication patterns, here are some initial observations: For the outsiders, they tend to (1) make evaluative and moral statements of reasoning in their interpretive process, (2) emphasize the voluntary choices and options of communication styles, rules, and types of relationships that are available, (3) understand Japanese behavior from a detached yet (for the most part) empathetic viewpoint; for the insiders, they tend to (1) engage in passive acceptance of existing cultural rules, practices, and norms, (2) emphasize the idea of fate, of fixed patterns of relationships, of not necessarily wanting the benefits of alternatives and choices, and (3) understand Japanese behavior with intuitive knowledge and experiential involvement.

In brief, this study is an exploratory attempt to synthesize two interpretive perspectives concerning core Japanese communication patterns. Both sets of interpretive accounts are valid, reporting and making sense of Japanese communication patterns from two different aspects of cultural reality. This paper is a beginning search, for the interpretive truths of the symbolic life of the Japanese culture.

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